Hume's Position Concerning Other Minds

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1 Three possible interpretations of Hume's sympathy

In the second book of the *Treatise*, Hume introduces sympathy as a principle, or rather as a "propensity [that] we have to sympathise with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to, our own" (T316). Regarding the problem how such a communication of affections is possible at all, three interpretations may be suggested in the following way :

(1) Sympathy is proposed by Hume specifically as a sort of "non-cognitive fellow-feeling" (Mercer 12), often called emotional infection or emotional identification, by which we know another's feeling immediately. Philip Mercer points out that Hume's notion of sympathy is very near to a psychological concept which is marked by Max Scheler in his noted work, *The Nature of Sympathy*. This interpretation explains why Hume spares separate sections for discussion of "the pride and humility of animals" and "the love and hatred of animals", and tries to show that "sympathy, or the communication of passions, takes place among animals, no less than among men" (T398).

(2) Sympathy is conceived by Hume principally as a mechanism by which we form a belief of others' feeling by the inference from their signs and behaviour. It is evidently a causal connection between affections and their external signs that Hume marks as the basis of sympathy by asserting: "When I see the effects of passion in the voice and gesture of any person, my mind immediately passes from these effects to their causes, and forms such a lively idea of the passion" (T576). Regarding this inference to the mental states of others, two interpretations may be suggested :

a) Another's affection is inferred in the same manner "as we conceive any other matter of fact" (T319). The exact parallel with the ordinary perceptual case is intended in Hume's discussion of sympathy, as it is his basic strategy to hold the analogy between the two systems of the understanding and of the passions.

b) Hume is committed to the position often characterised as 'the argument from analogy', as his notion of sympathy depends on the causal tie between the mental states and their behaviour which is established in our own case. "A great resemblance among all human creatures" (T318) is emphasised as the basis of sympathy, on which I may justifiably ascribe mental states to others by the relation

of the resemblance between their external signs and my own.

(3) Sympathy is a kind of person-perception (*1), which is distinct from ordinary perception in this: the former experience depend on a particular physical circumstance in which the perceiver and the perceived is related to each other in some concrete manner whereas the latter principally on a private affective experience, e.g. sensations, to which only the person concerned is accessible. This interpretation explains why Hume attaches importance to the immediate presence of another person before our eyes by mentioning "every one that approaches us" (T358). This is most explicit in his description of the concrete or detailed scenes of a terrible operation of surgery (T576), or of a shipwreck (T694). What distinguishes the perception of a person from the perception of a material object is that "the passions arise in conformity to the images" (T319) we form of another's affection.

It is plain that each of the three interpretations just suggested above pictures each of the three aspects which Hume's notion of sympathy consists of. Hume's position nevertheless seems better illustrated in the last interpretation, viz. sympathy as a person-perception, than the preceding two, as we shall see in the following argument. In this paper, I shall be mainly concerned with the indirect passions, as the direct passions needs to be discussed later only on the basis of the discussion of the indirect passions.

2 Passions as the 'hybrid' impressions

When Hume claims that sympathy "makes us partake of the satisfaction of every one that approaches us" (T358), he is no doubt committed to the problem how it is possible for us to be aware of the contents of another's mind. We may have a good ground to expect that Hume prepares some clue, not to say a solution, for the so-called problem of other minds in his discussion of sympathy.

It is a general opinion among critics, however, that "Hume appears to entertain no doubt whatsoever about our capacity for gaining awareness of the mental states of others---and, indeed, never directly addresses the issue of scepticism in this context" (Pitson 256). It is even suggested that "the existence of others as the subject of mental states is presupposed both in Hume's discussion of the understanding in Book I of the *Treatise*, and also in his discussion of the passions--in particular, the indirect passions--in Book II" (Pitson 256).

It is true that in Book I Hume has asked us to put the problem of other minds temporarily aside, by inviting us to "suppose we could see clearly into the breast of another, and observe that succession of perceptions which constitutes his mind or thinking principle" (T260). But could it really be the case that in his discussion of sympathy in Book II Hume has no concern with "obvious puzzles here arising from the literal impossibility of observing the mind of another person or self... , and

similarly of sharing the sentiments of another mind in any sense other than having sentiments which may be like those of someone else" (Pitson 261)? Should we agree with Pitson, and conclude that "Hume's position in relation to our knowledge of other selves is ultimately inconsistent" (Pitson 260)?

The object of this paper is to show that, even if he is not committed to the epistemological problem concerning other selves in his discussion of passions, he cannot be accused of inconsistency, as his apparent indifference to the problem of other minds is derived from the very structure of his system of passions. If I can prove this, it may follow that Hume has shown successfully without falling into the trap of the problem of other minds that "we enter so deep into the opinions and affections of others, whenever we discover them" (T319). It may not be entirely gratuitous to suggest that in this sense Hume's theory of sympathy is intended to have an important bearing on the problem of other minds.

This does not mean, however, that sympathy is intended by Hume as the solution of the epistemological problem concerning other selves. Sympathy is mentioned by him principally as a typical instance in which a passion arises from the double association of impressions and ideas. A (indirect) passion, in Hume's system, is defined principally as the "reflection" of another's affection in the sense in which the pleasurable or painful sensation our affection consists in is derived from another's affection.

That there must be another's affection as the source of the ingredient which composes our passion does not imply, however, that the production of a passion presupposes the existence of another's affection. Rather, the production of a passion is for Hume the proof of the existence of the sentiments of others. Our esteem for the rich and contempt for the poor, for instance, is regarded as the proof that, by sympathy, "we enter into the sentiments of rich and poor, and partake of their pleasure and uneasiness" (T362). For, it is his original satisfaction in the rich or poverty that supplies the ingredient, viz. the pleasurable or painful sensation, which our esteem or contempt is composed of, according to Hume.

Here may arise two questions regarding this method of reasoning. First, if our passion is derived from another's affection, there must be some original affection as the source of the passion. But how is the original affection as such possible at all? Secondly, how could it be guaranteed that our passion is the "rebound" of another's affection, when "no passion of another discovers itself immediately to the mind" (T576)?

3 The sandwich-structured system of the mind

In seeking the answer of the questions, we need to remember that the mind is pictured by Hume as a sandwich-structured system constituted of impressions and

ideas which appear alternatively in a definite order.

What makes the first layer of this system is mainly "the impressions of sensation," which "arises in the soul originally, from unknown causes" (T7). "It is certain," Hume assures us, "that the mind, in its perceptions, must begin somewhere ; and that since the impressions precede their correspondent ideas, there must be some impressions which, without any introduction, make their appearance in the soul" (T275). Here also included are some direct passions, viz. the desire of punishment to our enemies, and of happiness to our friends, hunger, lust and a few other bodily appetites, which "arise from a natural impulse or instinct" (T439). Although passions are mainly derived from ideas, there are those original ones which "produce good and evil, and proceed not from them, like the other affections" (T439).

What constitutes the second layer is the "copy taken by the mind" of these original sensations and passions, which "remains as ideas after the impression ceases". These ideas of pleasure or pain then "return upon the soul" to form the third layer as the impression of reflection, viz. "the new impressions of desire and aversion, hope and fear" (T8). A passion is thus defined principally as the "rebound" or "reflection" of the original sensation, derived mainly from ideas. These reflective impressions are again copied by the memory and imagination, and become ideas : which, perhaps, in their turn, give rise to other impressions and ideas, according to Hume. This system of Hume's is founded on his basic supposition that our experiences must be derived from the original sensations which arise either through our sense organs or from "a natural impulse or instinct".

The original sensations belonging to the first layer are modified or transformed when they "return upon the soul" in the third layer as new impressions, accompanied by other ideas or impressions. What is required for the illustration of the origin of passions is then to show how the original sensations, including those direct passions arising from "a natural impulse or instinct" (T439), could alter into the 'hybrid' impressions, after once being stored as ideas, and appear in the third layer. And when the original impression returns upon the soul as the reflective impression, it necessarily is accompanied by, or conjoined with, other ideas. The difference of the status or order of appearance in this system implies therefore this definite difference : the impression of sensation is a simple impression whereas the impression of reflection a compound, or rather 'hybrid' impression, which is composed of pleasurable or painful sensations combined with the idea of the self or the other self. If all sensations that are once copied as ideas and revived later as impressions are called "the impression of reflection", what could be the condition for the original impressions to re-appear as passions, desires, or emotions ?

Hume's strategy for this problem is to explain this re-appearance in terms of the "conversion" of an idea into an impression. He intends to show how the original sensation copied as an idea in the second layer could be revived again as a new

impression in the third layer by means of the two kinds of principles or "properties of human nature" (T283), viz. the association of ideas and the association of impressions.

What he marks as the key to the problem is that only those which "have a natural tendency to become strong and lively" (T359) have a good chance for re-appearance, viz. "such as our ideas of the passions and sensations of any human creature" (ibid.). For, they are so "favoured by most circumstance" in such a way as to be combined with the idea of the self or the other self while stored in the mind, that "the impressions or consciousness of our own person . . . makes us conceive them in the strongest and most lively manner" (T318). In other words, the general way for any original sensation to be altered or modified into a reflective impression is to be a compound or 'hybrid' impression by getting the partner either of the idea of the self or the other self, so as to be enlivened with the vivacity of its partner.

By taking the case in which our esteem for the rich is produced by the original satisfaction of the rich, Hume illustrates this mechanism in the following. What makes the first layer is "an original satisfaction in riches derived from that power which they bestow of enjoying all the pleasures of life" (T365). This original pleasure is "the first source of all the passions which arise from them" (T365), constituting "their very nature and essence". When this satisfaction of the rich is "thrown upon the beholder," it produces the idea of pleasurable sensation. When this idea is stored in the mind as an idea in the second layer, it is conjoined first with the idea of the rich, and then with the idea of ourselves invoked by the resemblance between the rich and ourselves owing to "a great resemblance among all human creatures" (T318). The original satisfaction of the rich is thus revived in the third layer as a 'hybrid' impression, viz. love or esteem, by acquiring vivacity conveyed from the "idea, or rather impression of ourselves" (T317). This is the way how a new passion, e.g. esteem, is derived from another person's affection, e.g. satisfaction, and composes the third layer of the system of the mind.

One might here suggest that this is the story of a single mind, which therefore has no direct bearing on the problem how the communication between two minds is possible at all. Or, one might request Hume to show how the production of our esteem could justify my belief in the existence of the rich's satisfaction. It is quite natural indeed to ask how Hume could guarantee the existence of the rich's satisfaction from which our esteem is derived. Why dose he assert an impression as such as "the first source of all the impression", in spite of that what is required as the source of our new passion is not necessarily the impression but the idea of his satisfaction? The epistemological problem of other selves lies, we may suggest, in the initial process in which we come to entertain the idea of the affection of others, viz. the relation between the fist and the second layer, and not in the succeeding process in which the idea is converted into an impression, viz. the relation between

the second and the third layer.

These objections might seem not entirely groundless. For, in so far as the initial "movements" (T319) of sympathy in which we come to conceive the states of minds of others are concerned, Hume obviously finds nothing peculiar which may distinguish our perception of others' affection from our ordinary perception of the material object. On the contrary : Hume assures us that we infer another's affection just "as we conceive any other matter of fact" : "when we sympathise with the passions and sentiments of others, these movements appear at first in our mind as mere ideas, and are conceived to belong to another person, as we conceive any other matter of fact" (T319). The difference between the two perceptions lies, according to him, only in that the inference of another's affection is necessarily succeeded by the process in which the idea is converted into an impression. Hume seems to assume quite simply that the necessary involvement of the conversion of an idea into an impression entails the authenticity of the inference of another's affection.

4 The perception of a material object v.s. the perception of a person

In order to seek Hume's answer to these objections, it may be helpful to take a concrete example, e.g. I see something in the roadside, and to suppose that in one case, the object, as approaching, turns out to be a dustbag, and in the other, to be a crouching man. Let us now try to see if any difference is asserted by Hume between these two kinds of perceptions.

As far as the process in which the rubbish and the affection of the person appear in my mind as ideas, and are conceived to belong to the bag or to the person, Hume does not see any essential difference between the two inferences. In both cases alike, it is by the relation of cause and effect that I am convinced of the reality of the object contained in the bag or in his mind. The idea of the rubbish or the affection may become a belief as it is enlivened by the vivacity derived from the present impression of the object as I approach it.

Regarding this process, however, in which I infer the rubbish or the affection from the external signs or symptoms, there may be asserted the following difference between the two causal processes : the belief in the existence of the rubbish is founded on the observed past conjunction between a dustbag and a rubbish, but there is no such observed conjunction between the person and his affection which the belief in the existence of another's affection can rely upon.

Hume seems quite indifferent to this difference derived from the difficulty involved in the latter inference. For he assumes that what makes the latter inference possible is the constant conjunction between the affection and their external signs or behaviour in general, and not the conjunction between the affection and the person concerned. Does it follow that Hume overlooks the crucial difference between the

inference of a rubbish and the inference of an affection ?

In his assertion that "when I see the effects of passion in the voice and gesture of any person, my mind immediately passes from these effects to their causes" (T576), Hume no doubt "endorses a constant conjunction between body and mind generally and not just in our own case" (Pitson 260). But it does not follow from this endorsement that "the existence of others as the subjects of mental states is presupposed" (Pitson 256), nor that "he does not recognise any epistemological problem concerning other selves" (Pitson 266). For, Hume is not committed to the problem, not because he neglects or overlooks it, but because he is sure that he can demonstrate that "we enter so deep into the opinions and affections of others, whenever we discover them" (T319) without involving any epistemological issue often alleged regarding the knowledge of other selves. Before examining how such a project is possible at all, we need to mark the following feature of his system of passions.

What is most characteristic in Hume's system is that no inherent connection is recognised between an affection and its owner. An affection is related to the person concerned as contingently as a rubbish is to a dustbag. An affection is certainly related to the affected person in an inseparable and unique manner, but it is only because it depends on "those organs . . . which are naturally fitted to produce that emotion (T288). Its connection to the person is exactly like the case of the sensory impressions connected to the person to which the sense organs belong. For, Hume's theory of passions is founded on the analogy between the bodily and non-bodily sensations: an (indirect) passion is for Hume virtually a sensation, or rather a 'hybrid' impression composed of pleasurable or painful sensation plus the idea of the self or the other self. Pride, for instance, depends on "the organs [which] are so disposed as to produce the passion" (T287), just as the bodily pain and pleasure depends on the nose and palate which are so disposed as in certain circumstances to convey such peculiar sensations to the mind. In his treatment of the direct passions, for instance, Hume recognises no difference between such non-bodily impressions as benevolence, desire, anger, and such bodily sensations as hunger, lust, and a few other bodily appetites. This assimilation of affections to the bodily sensations must be derived from his naturalist position that "it is evident we never should be possessed of that passion, were there not a disposition of mind proper for it" (T287).

The epistemological problem of other minds rests on the peculiarly unique connection between an affection and the person affected by it: an affection happens in the peculiar place called the mind which is open only to the person concerned. Against this position, Hume may ask, how could a passion happen in the mind when there is no such thing which may properly be called the mind, whether it is mine or others' ? If our mind or ourselves is nothing but a bundle of bodily and non-bodily

sensations as Hume pictures, the idea of the self or the other self must depend on the circumstance which gives rise to the sensations, but not vice versa. Here lies the reason why Hume is so exclusively concerned to the circumstance in which a passion arises, and why the entire content of Book II is spent for the illustration of the cause or origin of passions.

A passion is inseparably connected to the person concerned, not because it belongs to his mind which is open to him alone, but because it is only in terms of such passions that the identity of the person can be illustrated. Since an affection is virtually a sensation, it must happen at least, though non-bodily, within someone's body, but not necessarily in someone's mind. The connection between a passion and the person affected is contingent in the sense in which "the organs naturally fitted to produce that emotion" must belong to someone's body, just as it is with lust, hunger, and some bodily appetites which are connected to the person who suffers from them. A passion is for Hume basically a 'hybrid' impression: one and the same pleasurable sensation becomes pride when it is combined with the idea of the self, and love when combined with the idea of the other self. In the same manner, a painful sensation matched with the idea of the self would make humility, but hatred if conjoined with the idea of the other self. In Hume's system, affections thus "wheel about" (T336), being detached from or combined with a different partner according as the light in which the object in question varies its situation. We may here see what makes it possible for Hume to assert that a passion is "thrown upon the beholder" and is "received" by us just like in a catch-ball game.

5 The association of impressions

The general way of asking the problem of other minds may be put like this: "In order to be justified in ascribing mental states to others on the basis of their behaviour we should have discovered a constant conjunction between these types of cause and effect, whereas experience reveals their conjunction at most only in one case—our own— and leaves it an open question what may be the cause of the behaviour of others" (Pitson 260). But against such a common approach to this problem, Hume would maintain that what is relevant to the inference of another's affection is not the constant conjunction between his affection and the person, but the conjunction between the affection and its behaviour in general (*2). As far as the inference of another's affection from his behaviour is concerned, there is nothing for Hume which may distinguish it from the inference of a rubbish from the dustbag.

What is marked as a difference between these two kinds of inference instead is the peculiar circumstance in which the former **always** involves a causal inference of what is related to the object, e.g. the affection whereas it is not necessarily be so with the latter. In his assertion that "when I see the effects of passion in the voice and

gesture of any person, my mind **immediately** passes from these effect to their causes, and forms such a lively idea of the passion" (T576), we may see how Hume tries to call our attention to the immediateness and non-voluntariness of the process in which the mere sight of a person gives rise to the idea of his affection. This inference happens "**no sooner** any person approaches me" (T592).

What makes this peculiar circumstance distinct from the inference of any other ordinary matters is that in the former we not only infer but also "receive" or "enter into" what is inferred from the object: "we enter so deep into the opinions and affections of others, whenever we discover them" (T319). This peculiarity is explained by Hume in terms of a relation which is relevant only to the former, but not to the latter inference, viz. the resemblance between the object and the perceiver. But how is the resemblance between what is perceived and what perceives could enter into the circumstance and influence the relation of cause and effect?

There are two ways, according to Hume, for the relation of resemblance to have an influence over the former perception: it happens not only where we "remark this resemblance", but also "by the natural course of the disposition and by a certain sympathy which always arises betwixt similar characters" (T354). Regarding the first case in which we remark the resemblance, "it operates after the manner of a relation by producing a **connection of ideas**" (T354), according to him. When the connection of ideas depends on the recognition of the relation just as it is with the case of causality or contiguity, there is nothing peculiar to the perception of a person which may merit our special attention, as it is exactly analogous with the perception of any other ordinary matters.

But when we do not remark the resemblance, the relation "operates by **some other principle**" (T354). In other words, even when we do not recognise the relation, the resemblance may enter into the circumstance by producing the connection among **impressions**. For, the association of impressions is, unlike the association of ideas, not dependent on the recognition of the relation, so apt to "take fire from the least spark" (T354) at the presence of resembling materials. It is principally this second case that "a great resemblance among all human creatures" (T318) has an influence over the perception of a person.

The association of ideas prepares the easy passage for the imagination, producing "a compound by their conjunction, but not by their mixture" (T366), whereas the association of impressions cannot prepare the way for the imagination in such an arranged stepping-stone manner. For, unlike ideas, "impressions and passions are susceptible of an entire union, and like colours, may be blended so perfectly together" (T366) that "they readily mingle and unite, though they have but one relation, and sometimes without any" (T420). "The relation of ideas", therefore, "must forward the transition of impressions" (T380), and the former association that precedes shows the way for the latter connection. And it is when the resemblance

invokes the “concurrence” of those two kinds of associations or “principles” which forward the transition of ideas and those which operate on the impressions that “the same impression which we observe in others. . . arise[s] upon any slight occasion” (T354). That is to say, when we perceive a person instead of a dustbag, “the resemblance converts the idea of the affection into an impression” (T354) not only by means of the relation, viz. by transfusing the original vivacity into the idea of the affection, but also by the other means, viz. “by presenting such [resembling] materials as to take fire from the least spark” (ibid.).

When the resemblance joins the relation of cause and effect and prepares the channel between the object and ourselves, the latter’s vivacity is conveyed to enliven the related idea, making us conceive it “in the strongest and most lively manner” (T318): the idea of ourselves is, though an idea, the most vivacious present impression that it “conveys a sensible degree of vivacity to the idea of any other object to which we are related” (T354). And Hume’s point lies in that this lively idea does not remain an idea, but “changes by degrees into a real impression” (T354), so that “the new passion, therefore, must arise with so much greater violence” (T284). What makes this change possible is, we may remember, not only “a double impulse” (T284) caused the the association of ideas rendering the transition of the imagination “so much more easy and natural” (ibid.), but also the association of impressions “which always arises betwixt similar characters” (T354).

This conversion of an idea into an impression may be rephrased as the production of a new ‘hybrid’ impression composed of the pleasurable or painful sensation and the idea of the self or the other self. The former ingredient is derived from another’s affection, which alters into a ‘hybrid’ impression when it first acquires the vivacity conveyed from the present perception by the relation of cause and effect, and then from the idea of the self with which it is conjoined by resemblance. This is the very circumstance in which “the ideas of the affections of others are converted into the very impressions they represent” (T319). And when it is proved that “the passions arise in conformity to the images we form of them” (T319), Hume may be justified in claiming that “we enter so deep into the opinions and affections of others, whenever we discover them” (T319).

6 Conclusion

It may be our ordinary supposition that we have a commitment of the sentiment of others, if any at all, after having recognised first the object of the perception as a person. But if we follow Hume’s reasoning we have examined above, the perception of a person depends on the perception of his affection rather than vice versa: we are said to perceive a person as something distinct from a material object only when we “enter into the sentiment” of the object.

In Book I Hume tried to illustrate the identity of a person "by the same method of reasoning which has so successfully explained the identity of plants, and animals, and ships, and houses, and of all compounded and changeable productions either of art or nature" (T259). And now in Book II, the peculiarity of a person is illustrated in terms of the difference between the perception of a person and the perception of "any other matter of fact" (T319). Although there is a definite analogy between these two kinds of perception, the former is distinct from the latter in that it "contains something more surprising and extraordinary" (T320): the latter depends on the association of ideas whereas the former on the double association of ideas and impressions. The perception of an object becomes the perception of a person only when "those principles which forward the transition of ideas here concur with those which operate on the passions, and both uniting in one action" (T284). And a new passion arises as the natural consequence of the double association of impressions and ideas. "This is the nature and cause of sympathy; and it is after this manner we enter so deep into the opinions and affections of others, whenever we discover them" (T319), according to Hume.

note

- *1: There is a difficulty in this interpretation, one might suggest, since sympathy is defined by Hume as a "principle" (T577) rather than a form of perception. It is true that sympathy is introduced principally as a principle which "makes us partake of the satisfaction of every one that approaches us" (T358). But it must also be noted that sympathy is marked by Hume specifically as the "phenomena" (T319) in which the double association of impressions and ideas are typically illustrated. Sympathy is important in his system, just because it is "exactly correspondent to the operation of our understanding" (T320), though containing "something more surprising and extraordinary" (ibid). Sympathy is thus claimed to be dependent on "the relation of cause and effect, by which we are convinced of the reality of the passion with which we sympathise" (T329), just as it is with the case in which "we conceive any other matter of fact" (T319). Hume's intention lies, it seems to me, in claiming not merely that sympathy is dependent on the perception of "effects of passions in the voice and gesture of any person" (T576), but rather that sympathy is essentially a perception of "those external signs in the countenance and conversation, which convey an idea of" (T317) another's affection.
- *2: Hume asserts regarding sympathy that "when I see the effects of passion in the voice and gesture of any person, my mind immediately passes from these effects to their causes, and forms such a lively idea of the passion" (T576). It is plain that sympathy is claimed to be dependent on the relation of cause and effect established by the conjunction between affections and their behaviour, for which whether the behaviour in question belongs to myself or to others is quite irrelevant. It may not be gratuitous to suggest that no distinction is identified here by Hume between the conjunction of another person's affection and his behaviour on the one hand, and the conjunction of my own affection and my behaviour on the other. Hume obviously avoids the commitment of this distinction by resorting to the connection between another's affections and **their** behaviour instead of the connection between another's affections and **his** behaviour: "those [= affections]

external signs in the countenance and conversation” (T317), “the effects of passion in the voice and gesture” (T576).

References

References cited as (T–) are made to David Hume : *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford : Clarendon Press 1992). All emphases given in some part of Hume’s quotations are mine.

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